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A CASE STUDY: AFGHANISTAN - A SOVIET FAILURE

BY

Lieutenant Colonel Dennis J. Eflein  
United States Air Force

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A CASE STUDY: Afghanistan - A Soviet Failure

An Individual Study Project

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan, wrote nearly a century ago, "(t)he friendship of Afghanistan is of no service to Russia whatsoever, beyond allowing her to pass through the country to India, which means placing Afghanistan under the foot of Russia." During Christmas 1979, the Soviet Armed Forces crossed the borders of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and seized control in Kabul. What were the reasons behind the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviets? This international crisis has puzzled many because of lack of basic information. This case study will analyze the Soviet strategic objectives or goals as well as the factors which contributed to their decision to invade and occupy Afghanistan. Additionally, the paper will review the Soviet failures in Afghanistan and propose some lessons learned for the U.S. from their failures. To accomplish this, the case study will first briefly examine Afghanistan's demography and history. The paper will then describe the economic and political developments which preceded the Soviet invasion. Research revealed that there are many different interpretations on why the Soviets invaded when they did. This paper will consolidate many of those different theories.

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## A CASE STUDY: AFGHANISTAN - A SOVIET FAILURE

### INTRODUCTION

During Christmas 1979, the Soviet Armed Forces crossed the borders of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and seized control in Kabul. Under the pretense of a "request" by President Hafizullah Amin to help his Marxist government restore civil order, the Soviets invaded this small, landlocked South Asian country. Thus began a nine year Soviet involvement in the war in Afghanistan which inflicted heavy damages not only on the country itself, but more importantly on its people. For nine years, an estimated 115,000 or so Soviet military personnel continually waged war against the Afghan people.

The Soviet Union, which was at war in Afghanistan longer than it fought in World War II, lost approximately 13,850 men killed and three times that many wounded.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, they spent up to three billion dollars a year in this costly conflict.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the leadership of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev brought this "bleeding wound" to a halt.<sup>3</sup> The last Soviet contingents left Afghanistan in February 1989. The years of Soviet occupation created yet another chapter in Afghanistan's turbulent history.

Upon this background, this case study will analyze the major Soviet strategic objectives or goals as well as the factors which contributed to their decision to invade in Afghanistan. I will review the predominant Soviet political and military failures. Additionally, I will propose and outline lessons that we, the United States, can learn from those Soviet failures. First,

United States, can learn from those Soviet failures. First, though, in order to acquaint the reader with Afghanistan, this paper will briefly examine Afghanistan's demography and history. Secondly, it will describe the economic and political developments which preceded the Soviet invasion. To fully understand Afghanistan and its political climate, one must have a basic understanding of its society and living conditions.

#### AFGHANISTAN DEMOGRAPHY: SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

Afghanistan is an extremely mountainous country about the size of Texas. It is completely landlocked, and encompasses approximately 647,500 square kilometers.<sup>4</sup> It borders on and is surrounded by the Soviet Union, Iran, and Pakistan. It also shares a common border with China; a 76 kilometer stretch known as Afghanistan's Wasteland Corridor.<sup>5</sup> (See Map at Figure 1.)

The terrain varies from rugged mountains that traverse the center of the country to river basins, flood plains, and deserts. The Hindu Kush mountains, containing the highest peaks in the country, reach to over 7,000 meters above sea level.<sup>6</sup> The mountainous regions within Afghanistan are transected by a number of strategically important passes. These passes lead from Afghanistan to neighboring Pakistan, and thus to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>7</sup> (See Map at Figure 2.)

Rivers have a special significance in this arid country. They provide water for both crop irrigation and human and animal consumption. The major river basins are the Amu Darya, Helmand, Harirud, and the Kabuh.<sup>8</sup> Because of the limited irrigation,

only twelve percent of the land is arable. Meadows and pastures account for forty-six percent of the land; forest and woodlands comprise only three percent. The general climate of the country varies from cold, harsh winters to hot, dry summers.

Geologically, Afghanistan is noted for the richness of its minerals and oil resources. The mineral resources include copper, iron, coal, lead, zinc, lithium, gold, uranium, and precious and semi-precious stones.<sup>9</sup>

Since arable land is a limited resource, Afghanistan is an extremely poor nation, and is highly dependent on farming. The 1989 estimated average annual per capita income was only two hundred dollars.<sup>10</sup> The Afghan war lowered the gross domestic product dramatically; primarily because of the loss of labor and capital, but also because of the resultant disruption of trade and transportation.

Sixty-eight percent of the population depend upon agriculture and animal husbandry as a primary means of subsistence.<sup>11</sup> The predominant agricultural asset is wheat; sheep and goats comprise most of the livestock. Sometimes groups of families will form to combine animal husbandry with farming.

The religion of the population is predominantly Muslim. Of these, eighty-four percent are Sunni, and fifteen percent are Shiite. They are further divided into four major ethnic groups: Pashtun (fifty percent), Tajik (twenty-five percent), Uzbek (nine percent), and Hazara (twelve percent).

The estimated population according to the U.S. Bureau of the

Census is approximately 16,450,340. The people speak three major languages: Pashtu (fifty percent), Afghan Persian (Dari) (thirty-five percent), and Turkish (eleven percent). However, some thirty minor languages are also spoken in different regions.

The average life expectancy at birth is forty-four years for a male and forty-three years for a female. The infant mortality rate is high: 164 deaths per 1000 infants.<sup>12</sup>

Most of the Afghan population lives in rural areas and require low-cost, low-volume roads. The first improved roads were constructed in the 1930's. The transportation infrastructure was built by the Soviet Union and the United States in order to link Afghanistan to other commercial and economic spheres. This road network connects the capital city, Kabul, with the five largest cities in the country. The Soviet contribution linked their border towns with Afghanistan thereby creating future potential invasion routes, while the United States joined Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran. This new road network improved domestic trade between regions, thus improving the national economy. However, many towns and villages are still connected by unimproved roads and trails. Telephones, electric power, and other modern conveniences exist only in the larger cities. In 1978, only five percent of the population had access to electricity, and in 1982, that figure had only improved to ten percent.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the uneven terrain in Afghanistan, railroad construction and operation proved too costly to pursue. The

Soviet occupation did attempt to build a railroad capable of both military and commercial movements across the Amu Darya. The project failed to be completed because it was cost-prohibitive.<sup>14</sup> To date, no commercial means of transportation across the vast desert is available.

#### AFGHANISTAN HISTORY

Primarily as a function of its location, Afghanistan has a history as an ancient crossroads. Four culturally different areas have all converged here: the Middle East, Central Asia, the Far East, and South Asia. In the nineteenth century, its geographic location has made the region strategically necessary for the control of the Indian subcontinent. Afghanistan has been the arena of conflict between many great empires. It has been the site of both invasions and migrations.

At various times, Afghanistan's internal political development and its foreign relations have been temporarily controlled by strong neighboring powers. Many conquering armies attempted to dominate the region, including the British and the Russians. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the confrontation in Afghanistan between two great empires, Britain and Russia, became known as the "Great Game." Not only did their spheres of influence collide, but there were repeated attempts to install puppet governments into power in Kabul.<sup>15</sup> As the two great empires confronted each other, Afghanistan lay between them. The Russians were interested in trade and warm water ports in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. The British saw the

Russians as a threat to their interests on the Indian subcontinent.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout this nineteenth century rivalry between these two empires over the region, the Afghans resisted domination by either side. After three wars within Afghanistan, the British succeeded in political domination, but were unable to totally dominate the region. Thus, Afghanistan served as a buffer zone between the two superpowers.

Afghanistan's present borders were established by a joint Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission in 1895.<sup>17</sup> At the conclusion of the War of 1919, Anglo-Afghan negotiations provided for the right of Afghanistan to conduct its own foreign affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Soviets initially adopted a strategy designed to appease the Muslims within its borders. As part of that plan, the Soviets eagerly established cordial relations with neighboring Afghanistan -- a predominantly Muslim state.<sup>19</sup> However, they were "truly cordial" to Afghanistan only when trying to appease their own Muslims people.

#### AFGHANISTAN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Soviets were one of the first governments to extend diplomatic recognition to the new government of Afghanistan. At the same time, however, the 1921 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty was based primarily upon the Soviet national interest. That interest "sought to consolidate its hold on the independent Afghanistan."<sup>20</sup> In its first form of foreign aid, the Soviets

furnished the Afghans with twelve fighter aircraft to counter rebellious tribesmen.<sup>21</sup> Even with this type of aid, Afghanistan chose to adhere to a policy of neutrality in world affairs.<sup>22</sup>

This indigent and backward Afghanistan required more foreign aid to stimulate economic growth and modernization. The nation recognized the importance of cooperating with foreign powers in order to foster growth and achieve development. However, early rulers opted for independence over economic growth; primarily due to mistrust of foreigners and their aid.<sup>23</sup> Foreign ties, however, did continue to slowly develop. The Soviets built the first telephone lines in 1924. Soviet and Afghan friendship and non-aggressive commitments were reaffirmed by treaties in 1926 and 1931.<sup>24</sup> In 1934, Afghanistan became a member of the League of Nations. That same year, it signed a pact of friendship with the United States.

Throughout World War II, Afghanistan maintained a policy of neutrality toward all belligerent nations.<sup>25</sup> After the war, it manipulated both the East and West for economic aid. In early 1945, the United States and Afghanistan inaugurated the giant Helmand Valley Project. This project, designed to harness the irrigation and hydroelectric potential of the Helmand River, brought Afghanistan into a closer working relationship with the United States. Because the project was haunted by numerous technological problems on both sides, it was not completed until 1950.<sup>26</sup> The misunderstanding and distrust bred by this project resulted in a poor start by the United States in its foreign aid

projects in Afghanistan.

During the post World War II years, the United States was focused mainly on the economic and political reconstruction of Europe and Japan. Concerned with Soviet containment, Mao's revolution in China, and later the Korean War, policy makers in the United States did not give the foreign policy relationship with Afghanistan a high priority. Afghanistan was not considered essential for Western security.<sup>27</sup>

During this period, in an effort to counter communism, the United States stressed military alliances through organizations such as the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), Central Treaty Organization, and the Baghdad Pact. The United States asked Afghanistan to pledge itself to a mutual security agreement in exchange for United States military and economic aid. The Afghans declined to join any of the mutual security organizations, and in response, the United States refused to support Afghanistan with military arms.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, Pakistan, which was Afghanistan's rival neighbor, received both military and economic aid from the United States when it became a signatory to various mutual security agreements.<sup>29</sup>

The post-war years saw limited competition for Afghanistan between the Soviet Union and the United States. Because of their geographical proximity, the Soviets "treated their southern neighbors as an experimental economic Korea, to test to what extent Washington was prepared to compete under pressure in a non-aligned Third World country."<sup>30</sup>

In the 1950's, trade between the United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) and Afghanistan expanded rapidly. Trade offices and favorable loan terms from the Soviets cultivated Afghan dependence on the USSR as a primary trading partner.<sup>32</sup> In 1955, a new bilateral barter agreement was reached, providing for Soviet petroleum, building material and metal, in exchange for Afghan raw materials. This helped to eliminate gasoline rationing in Afghanistan and aided in the construction of more telephone and telegraph lines.<sup>33</sup>

From 1955 through 1965, Afghan-Soviet ties strengthened, thus drawing Afghanistan deeper into the Soviet sphere of economic influence. During this period, the Soviets provided a development loan of \$552 million in foreign aid. Between 1956 and 1972, foreign aid in the forms of commodity assistance, project aid, and technical assistance and expertise totalled nearly \$1.2 billion. In this time period, Soviet aid accounted for fifty percent of aid to Afghanistan, while the United States' contributions totalled only thirty percent.<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly, by 1970, the Soviets were deeply entrenched as a dominant power in Afghanistan's military and economic developments. Coupled with the foreign aid, of course, were Soviet political activities that would eventually influence Afghanistan's future.

#### AFGHAN POLITICS

To understand Afghan politics, one must understand the Afghan individual. He is fiercely independent not only in his personal life but also in his community life. Geography and

difficult living conditions in the country have contributed to creating a decentralized tribal culture. Among the many hundreds of tribes and subtribes, self-rule is predominate. Throughout its history, Afghans have tended to resist all types of centralized government.

Ethnic, class, and ideological differences often contribute to political dissent -- and did contribute to the political dissent that had become a factor in everyday life in Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> With approximately eighty percent of the population away from the big cities, and away from governmental influence, the political atmosphere in Afghanistan was in turmoil from 1930 through the 1960's. Even in pre-communist governments, resistance surfaced between rival religious groups. By late 1979, there were six Afghan resistance parties, working out of Pakistan, opposing the existing governments' policies and programs.

The Soviets did not establish a communist party in the country, and they were not politically active to any great extent until the 1960's. Even in the 1960's, Soviet political activism was limited.

The early 1960's saw the creation of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The party was created by Nur Mohammed Taraki, a popular leader of the masses. This clandestine group never mentioned its communist nature; and tried to conceal its "true" party platform. Its overt platform called for a "national democratic" form of government. However, the

covert party line was definitely loyal and dedicated to Marxism-leninism.<sup>35</sup> Distrust, dissension between members, and internal corruption led to the splintering of the PDPA into two pro-Soviet factions, the "Parchami" and the "Khalq." Another contributing factor to the disintegration of the PDPA was prejudice: cultural, tribal, ethnic, and language prejudices between the members.<sup>36</sup>

"Parchami" means "the banner," or "flag." This faction was led by Babrak Karmal, the son of an Army general. Its members were predominately successful, educated, urban intellectuals.<sup>37</sup>

"Khalq" means "the masses" or "the people." Led by Nur Mohammed Taraki, its followers were from modest rural backgrounds.<sup>38</sup> The Khalq faction pursued uncompromising revolutionary socialism; while the Parchami favored democratic revolution.<sup>39</sup>

In 1973, General Mohammed Daoud, the king's cousin, with the aid of Babrak Karmal and the Parchami faction, overthrew the monarchy of the country and proclaimed a republic. General Daoud named himself the new president.<sup>40</sup>

In 1976, with increasing Soviet involvement and Afghan governmental persecution, the factions set aside their ideological differences and temporarily reunified the PDPA.<sup>41</sup> This united party opposed the Daoud government. Its opposition to the Daoud government grew and solidified in 1977. When a leading leftist newspaper editor and member of the PDPA Central Committee was assassinated on 17 April 1978, a large anti-

government crowd took to the street during the funeral to protest his death. This leftist sympathy alarmed the Afghan government. In an effort to restore civil order, President Daoud had several PDPA leaders arrested. The list of those arrested included Babrak Karmal, Nur Mohammad Taraki, and Hafizullah Amin.<sup>42</sup>

For six years, Daoud had attempted to consolidate his political power. The Parchami, as well as the Soviets, wanted him to move closer to the Soviet camp. However, Daoud's initiatives during his power consolidation were clearly contrary to this desire. He purged virtually all the Parchami members from his government, and began to distance himself from Moscow by attempting to improve relations with Egypt, India, and Iran. Additionally, in 1975, he attempted to better relations with Afghanistan's traditional enemy, Pakistan, by resolving their border differences. In April 1978, after two days of bloody fighting, a coup unseated Daoud. "The Great Saur Revolution," as the coup d'etat became known, was planned and carried out by the PDPA. Although no evidence exists that Moscow played a direct role in the coup, evidence suggests it approved the change in government.<sup>43</sup>

After the April 1978 coup of the Daoud government, the Afghan Army turned the government over to the PDPA. Nur Mohammed Taraki, the Secretary General of the PDPA, declared the founding of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), and he was then proclaimed President of the new republic. Babrak Karmal, leader of the dominant Khalq faction, was named vice-president in the

new government.<sup>44</sup> This coalition government pressed for social and agricultural reforms. Its New Revolutionary Counsel called upon the "peasants, workers, artisans, and intelligentsia" to unite and support the party.<sup>45</sup> However, the attempted reforms were hurried; they went against the ethnic and cultural values of the masses. The unpopular reforms resulted in negative reaction to the new government.<sup>46</sup>

During this time, fragmentation of the fragile coalition government increased. Disagreements concerning specific policies and implementation of government programs started to redivide the Khalq and the Parchami.<sup>47</sup> Taraki reacted by purging Parchami members from the government. This renewed split of the PDPA fostered civil unrest and insurgent groups began to oppose the government. That opposition was fueled by a growing fear among many that Taraki was making Afghanistan a Soviet satellite.<sup>48</sup>

By the end of 1978, the Marxist-Leninist government in the capital was definitely supported by the Soviets. Growing Soviet involvement consisted of increased aid and an increase in the number of military and others advisors after the April 1978 coup. The Soviet advisory effort increased to over two thousand military and three thousand civilian officials.<sup>49</sup> Civilian advisors provided normal developmental assistance services, while the military advisors provided ordinary military and technical assistance. The Soviets permeated both the Afghan military and civilian structure.<sup>50</sup>

Taraki signed a twenty-year treaty of Friendship, Good

Neighborliness, and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in December of 1978.<sup>51</sup> This document provided for mutually beneficial economic, scientific, and technical cooperation; respect for Afghanistan's "policy of non-alignment"; and joint consultation on international issues affecting their interests.<sup>52</sup> However, one article of the treaty was ominous. Article 4 guaranteed that the two nations "shall consult each other and take by agreement appropriate measures to ensure the security, independence, and territorial integrity of the two countries" and will "develop cooperation in the military field on the basis of appropriate agreements concluded between them." The security agreement would later provide formal justification for the Soviet invasion in December 1979.<sup>53</sup>

Throughout 1979, internal instability in Afghanistan, particularly in the outlying countryside, continued to increase. Insurgents kidnapped the new American Ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs; he was later killed by the Afghan police when Soviet advisors instructed the Army to overrun the insurgents. Further, major Army mutinies which resulted in Afghan soldiers killing Soviet advisors and dependents intensified harsh government reaction to crush the anti-government opposition.<sup>54</sup> As a result of the Dubs' murder, the United States sharply reduced its aid and operations in Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup>

The government reorganized five times between July of 1978 and July of 1979. This conflict represents the political problems that existed, as well as the intense struggle for power.

between Taraki and Amin.<sup>56</sup> As the situation deteriorated, the rebellion spread; Taraki and Amin differed on how to manage the situation. By Fall, the regime's repressive measures had intensified anti-government opposition.

During a meeting with Kremlin leaders, Taraki and Brezhnev agreed on a more moderate course for a program of democratic nationalism. This more moderate approach was designed to improve the regime's popular appeal.<sup>57</sup> The plan also called for the assassination of Amin, who was then the Prime Minister of Afghanistan. Before the plan could be executed, however, Hafizullah Amin organized and led a counter-coup d'etat: Taraki was overthrown and killed.<sup>58</sup>

Hafizullah Amin, an Afghan nationalist, was viewed as a source of trouble, and was thus distrusted by the Soviets.<sup>59</sup> Although Moscow was disappointed with Afghanistan's new president, it continued to send aid and participate in numerous joint ventures, particularly within the military sphere. However, both Brezhnev and Amin knew Afghanistan desperately needed Soviet military equipment and economic aid.

Amin attempted to consolidate his power and gain popular support. However, when he ordered the USSR ambassador back to Moscow, his days as president were numbered. Allowing the independent-minded Amin to stay in power would jeopardize the massive investment that the Soviets had in Afghanistan. On December 27, 1979, the Soviets intervened by crossing the border with fifty-thousand Soviet troops. The death of Amin created a

void which was filled by Babrak Karmal, the early leader of the Parchamis. Babrak Karmal, a Soviet stooge, was in the USSR when he made his radio broadcast announcing the coup and the "national jihad." Four days after the Soviets secured Kabul, Babrak, the president of the new 57-member Revolutionary Council, prime minister of the government, and secretary general of the PDPA returned to Afghanistan to make his first public appearance.<sup>61</sup>

#### SOVIET OBJECTIVES

The Soviets participated actively and directly in the revolution that followed the 1978 coup. As Weinland, in his technical report, "An Explanation of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan" indicates:

Soviet participation in the implementation of the Afghan revolution, the growing resistance within the populace to the social and economic changes brought on by the revolution, and the consequent prospect of the revolution's imminent failure, that appears to have been primarily responsible for their invasion and subsequent occupation of the country.<sup>62</sup>

Further, if the Soviets had not acted when they did, the following sequence of events has been postulated by Weinland: first, a collapse of the Hafizullah Amin regime, followed by total anarchy within the country. The replacement of the Khalq government most probably would have been with a more nationalist/politically reactionary government. Additionally, a change of government would have invited the West to assist in the restoration and maintenance of order in Afghanistan.<sup>63</sup> Had this sequence of events happened, the Soviet Union would have suffered

significant economic setbacks, as well as political embarrassment.

Ever since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, many diplomats, scholars, and media personnel have debated the objectives and goals of the USSR. The Soviets did not plan the Afghan invasion years in advance, although they did provide the long-term investment discussed earlier. The Soviets' strategic objectives, or goals, can only be ascertained by examining the relationship between political events and the quantity of Soviet economic and military aid meted out in response.

At first blush, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan appears to resemble that of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Several sources indicated that the Soviet decision to invade and occupy Afghanistan was a matter of timing rather than a reckless pursuit of national objectives. However, the overall Soviet objectives in the region can best be analyzed by examining the rationale for their intervention in the first place. The initial intervention and subsequent occupation was motivated by both internal and external considerations.

#### INTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

The primary Soviet objective was to protect Afghanistan by neutralizing, and, if possible, excluding, other "western" powers from Southwest Asia.<sup>63</sup> Soviet politics and political decisions traditionally have been guided by the all-important search for defensible borders. Thus, it was this Soviet preoccupation with border defense that led to the Soviet response of intervention

when conditions within Afghanistan became unpredictable.

In the early nineteenth century, Russia had an interest in securing its southern borders. This, combined with Dostoevski's "civilizing mission" directed at the Central Asian nations, led to Russia's annexation of the northern Panjdeh district, which had been occupied by Turkish tribesmen.<sup>54</sup> In the 1920's and 1930's, the Soviet army continued the obsession to secure Russia's "sacred borders" by fighting Muslim adversaries known as the Basmachi (Bandits) in central Asia when the Basmachi sought refuge in northern Afghanistan.

This Soviet paranoia about the security of its borders is a result of its history of invasions by hostile neighbors. The USSR has been invaded by every geographical direction except the north. A political objective, then, became to secure its borders by surrounding itself with neutral, subservient states.<sup>55</sup> From Moscow's point of view, this could best be done by having Russian soldiers standing on both sides of the border -- as was done in Outer Mongolia, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The Soviets learned early that neighboring communist regimes' loyalty could be guaranteed by stationing large contingents of Soviet troops in their countries. These Soviet troops could counter NATO's southern flank and provide stability against the Khomeni government of Iran, which was also anti-Soviet. Thus, Soviet occupation of an adjacent and unstable border country fits into a past pattern of securing a "buffer zone" to protect its borders, thereby providing for the defense

of Mother Russia.

A second objective of Soviet policy was to use its "close" relationship with Afghanistan to create problems for Pakistan, a strong ally of the United States. During the many confrontations between Afghanistan and Pakistan over disputed boundaries, the Soviets repeatedly backed the Afghans. The Soviets continually used diplomatic crises between these two countries, and their ability to control Afghanistan, as methods to press for stronger Soviet-Pakistan relations. Additionally, as a result of Moscow's investments, including the Soviet built roads and airfields discussed earlier, Afghanistan provided facilities to conduct large-scale military operations, if required, against both Iran and Pakistan.

Unlike Pakistan and Iran, Afghanistan did not join the various anti-Soviet alliances promoted by the United States in pursuit of the United States' policy of "containment." Afghanistan had to turn to the Kremlin for its military needs and economic aid. This protective relationship provided the opportunity for the Soviets to keep their southern neighbor out of the sphere of western influence. The Soviets could not risk an Afghan regime, that if overthrown by rebels, could bring into power an anti-Soviet regime; particularly if such a regime had close alliances with Pakistan, Iran, and other enemies of the Soviet Union. To lose Afghanistan from Soviet influence would mean that the "Soviet army would have to defend 1,500 additional miles of frontier."<sup>66</sup> As Brezhnev stated, there was:

a real threat that Afghanistan would lose its independence and be turned into an imperialist military bridgehead on our southern border.... The time came when we no longer could fail to respond to the request of the government of friendly Afghanistan. To have acted otherwise would have meant leaving Afghanistan a prey to imperialism, allowing the aggressive forces to repeat in that country what they had succeeded in doing, for instance, in Chili.... To have acted otherwise would have meant to watch passively the establishment on our southern border of a seat of serious danger to the security of the Soviet Union."

In Brezhnev's opinion, then, if the United States had obtained military basing in Afghanistan, Soviet defense problems would have been dramatically increased. The Soviet Union believed it had to maintain its influence over Afghanistan; it had to eliminate the western sphere of influence by excluding the west.

Another objective opined by David Rees, in his article "Afghanistan's Role in Soviet Strategy," indicates that the Soviets were interested in increasing their interests on the "rimlands" of the Middle East oil-producing countries.<sup>58</sup> The Soviet "rimland" strategy was part of an overall Soviet plan to potentially deny access to Middle East oil reserves to the West. During this time period, the Soviets were expanding their influence in Ethiopia, South Yemen, Angola, and Mozambique; all areas that were adjacent to the Cape oil routes. The Soviets knew that the Persian Gulf oilfields contained roughly sixty percent of the global oil reserves, and that Europe and Japan were heavily dependent on its supply.<sup>59</sup> Thus, a strategic

encirclement of the Middle East by the Soviets and their allies could have created a Soviet collective security system, capable of excluding or at least confronting the Western powers.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, it would have provided the Soviets access to new oil resources at a time that their native Siberian oil reserves were getting prohibitively expensive to exploit.<sup>71</sup>

Soviet power and influence was expanding on the southern rimland of the Persian Gulf. This power projection, coupled with the Iranian revolution and the vulnerability of the Saudi regime, as evidenced by the abortive coup in Mecca, gave the Soviets a chance to solidify their influence by invading Afghanistan. This invasion anchored Soviet power and influence in the northern area. Had the Soviets won in Afghanistan and succeeded in their strategic objective to surround the Gulf oilfields with a Soviet presence, the West's vitally important Gulf oil resources would have been dramatically threatened.<sup>72</sup> The Soviet threat would have been stationed a mere three hundred miles from the strategically important Strait of Hormuz; thus placing the Soviets at a commanding geographical advantage.<sup>73</sup>

A fourth impetus for the invasion, was the communist ideological principle put forth in the Brezhnev Doctrine. It insisted the Moscow-style communism must be maintained throughout the Soviet sphere of influence and that the USSR has a right to intervene to preserve and protect it. As Brezhnev stated, "The revolutionary process in Afghanistan is irreversible." Moscow viewed world communism as indivisible and inevitable. The

Kremlin made it "their duty to intervene whenever a communist regime was threatened by counter-revolutionaries."<sup>74</sup>

If a socialist-oriented Afghanistan became unstable and fell outside the communist sphere of influence, the Soviets would suffer a resultant loss in prestige. Thus, the Soviets had a vested interest in ensuring that its neighboring communist state remained communist. The USSR attempted to emphasize and project, through military and economic aid, a "good neighbor" image to other Third World nations. The "good neighbor" image promoted the Soviet image as an Asian power concerned with the welfare of lesser-developed nations.<sup>75</sup> The nine-year occupation of Afghanistan, however, somewhat tarnished this "good neighbor" image.

Although not substantiated by any Soviet official, some Western sources believe Moscow had another objective for invading Afghanistan. One cannot overlook the historical Soviet Union desire for expansion. Some analysis believe the Soviet Union invasion was based on that centuries-old tradition of Russian imperialism. Early Russian Czars desired warm water ports. The Black Sea has the only southern ports available to the Soviet Navy. Turkey controlled the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which provided the only access for the Soviet Navy to enter the Mediterranean Sea. Once there, Soviet ships could only reach open seas by way of the Strait of Gibraltar or via the Suez Canal. A warm water port would have significantly alleviated Soviet naval problems by providing the Navy with flexibility and

new freedom in the Indian Ocean. The control of Afghanistan placed the Soviets at a strategic cross-roads; they now had a potential threat to ports in Pakistan or oil-rich Iran.

#### EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS

A number of external factors also contributed to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. One such factor was the need to safeguard threatened Soviet interests within Afghanistan. In addition to protecting its economic investments discussed above, the Soviets were interested in acquiring the mineral wealth of Afghanistan as well as in maintaining the natural gas supply to Central Russia.<sup>16</sup>

A second catalyst for the Soviet invasion was a growing fear of spreading Muslim fanaticism. The Soviets perceived a threat to the communist government in Afghanistan by Muslims. If the Muslims in Afghanistan succeeded in overthrowing communism and driving out the Russians, they believed a chain reaction could begin. In this scenario, the Muslims in Central Asia would have tried to emulate their successful counterparts. This would have created a danger of Islamic fundamentalism spreading to the southern USSR.<sup>17</sup>

The Soviets calculated that the U.S. was impotent to respond militarily to any communist aggression in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> The perception of the United States' impotence was supported by the Iranian hostage situation: the U.S. was unable to respond. President Carter and his administration were perceived as weak both at home and abroad. The American Congress was vacillating

on the SALT II agreement, as well as on the issue of the Panama Canal. Additionally, the Soviets correctly believed that the Americans were still haunted by their failure in the Vietnam War."<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the Soviet decision to occupy Afghanistan was more a matter of timing than a reckless pursuit of national objectives. The reasons for intervening were both internal (defensive) and external (offensive). The decision to invade was influenced by the instability of Afghanistan, the geography, history, ideology, and interests of the Soviet Union; and also by the inability of the United States to respond to Soviet aggression.

The short-term Soviet objective was to stabilize a Leninist-type country whose communist regime was in danger of being overthrown due to internal unrest. It was not a move lightly taken by the Soviets; Moscow felt seriously threatened by what was happening in Afghanistan, particularly since Afghanistan was both a Third World and an Islamic nation. The Soviets entered Afghanistan at a time when they perceived that Pakistan, a long time western ally, was extremely vulnerable and Iran was experiencing extreme internal chaos. It appears that the Soviets had to pacify the regime in Afghanistan because they saw problems with the growing unrest of Muslims along its own southern borders. As a consequence of the invasion, perhaps Moscow felt they would be in a more favorable position to exploit future opportunities in the volatile Persian Gulf. However, the Kremlin

failed to control this strategically important real-estate in the Third World through the direct use of military power.

The question then presents itself: if their reasons were strategically sound, and the timing was right, why did the Soviets lose? Further, can we learn anything from their failures?

#### SOVIET FAILURES

The Soviets did not fully comprehended the ramifications of the war in store for them when they invaded and occupied Afghanistan. As Carl Von Clausewitz indicated, "the political object, as the original motive of the war, should be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made." When the Soviets entered Afghanistan, they became involved in a low-intensity conflict for which they were ill-prepared to fight. They underestimated how protracted the war would be, and failed to realize how unpleasant its political and military consequences would become.

The Soviets lost in Afghanistan for military as well as political miscalculations. Militarily, the Soviets lacked a basic coherent strategy to fight in a low-intensity conflict. Their doctrine, force structure and equipment usage were based on a "set-piece European theater strategic offensive."<sup>33</sup> The Soviet war machine tried to employ European-style force and tactics in a protracted low-intensity warfare against a guerilla force in mountain terrain. The Soviets suffered from inflexibility, a lack of mobility, and inefficiency in a

protracted military campaign.<sup>32</sup> They failed at combining a basic air and land campaign.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, because of the tight control at higher headquarters, officers were not able to make any independent battlefield decisions.<sup>34</sup> The force structure was unprepared, both physically and psychologically, for the rigorous conditions in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

Further, the Soviets initially used Central Asian Muslim troops to fight Afghan rebels, who were also Muslim. This resulted in fraternization by the similar ethnic and religious groups. Some of the troops were exchanging religious material instead of engaging in warfare. This miscalculation contributed to low morale and widespread defection from the Soviet Army.<sup>36</sup>

Another fundamental error of the Soviet military was its inability and failure to consolidate the Afghan military into a viable military force. This caused Moscow and her Soviet troops to bear the brunt of anti-guerrilla fighting.<sup>37</sup>

Politically, the Soviet Union made a fundamental error in judgment by overestimating the Kabul government's capacity to garner massive popular support. They did not understand the Afghan people; nor did they know how to win their "hearts and minds".<sup>38</sup> Popular support was required if the existing regime was to gain legitimacy.

The USSR also failed miserably in their estimate of the degree to which the Afghans would resist the superior firepower of the Soviet Union. Despite the superior Soviet weaponry, the Afghan people did not surrender; opting instead to fight.

The Soviets failed to anticipate the overwhelming nationalist and international reaction to the invasion. The opposition grew against the pro-communist government but "it took the physical presence of Soviet troops and tanks to provoke most of Afghanistan's 15-17 million Muslims to take up arms and defend the independence of their homeland."<sup>88</sup> The Soviets, throughout the occupation, failed to understand the depth of the Muslim hatred and resistance. Their efforts to reach the Islamic fundamentalists with changes in the Kabul regime did not work.

On the international scene, the Soviets neglected to insulate Afghanistan from the outside world, thus allowing greater military and foreign assistance to reach the rebels by way of Pakistan.<sup>89</sup> The improved weapons, especially the Stinger air-to-air missile transported via Pakistan, proved most effective against Soviet aircraft.<sup>90</sup>

#### LESSONS LEARNED

An analysis of the Soviet failures can provide lessons in how to plan and conduct a low-intensity conflict. With the loss of the Soviets' superpower image and influence, regional conflicts are certain to arise in all parts of the world. These regional conflicts will most likely be in the form of low-intensity or local wars. Stephen Blank cites seven lessons in his book "Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-1990." They are:

- The importance of improved small unit capability for independent action;

- The importance of command of the air and neutralization of enemy air defense;
- Better training and logistics for unconventional wars;
- The importance of morale and unit cohesion;
- The need for better intelligence assessments;
- The need to learn how to fight defensively; and,
- Strategies for winning small wars: denial of cities to the enemy.<sup>91</sup>

These lessons pertain to the operational and force structure, and are important factors to consider in the conduct of operations in low intensity conflicts.

A basic lesson to be learned is that a nation must not blindly blunder into an unconventional war without a full understanding of the basic political, economic, and military objectives which can be achieved in the conflict. The military-political role must be clearly defined and understood. The nation must only use the amount of force necessary to conduct the required and desired operation. The military planner must effectively analyze the conflict and interpret its strategic, operational and tactical objectives.<sup>92</sup> A superior intelligence network and operation is imperative in winning a low-intensity conflict.

Another lesson is to avoid the miscalculation of the nature of the theater and the type of warfare suitable for it. This error in strategic assessment can lead to military disaster. Proper coordination, balance and trained personnel to carry out the mission is essential.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to briefly review Afghanistan's demography and history, including the political and economic developments that preceded the Soviet invasion. Additionally, it reviewed and discussed the major Soviet internal and external objectives which led to the invasion and occupation. Thirdly, it reviewed the strategic failures in this low-intensity conflict, and the reasons therefore. Lastly, I presented some important lessons learned that will assist us to develop and maintain workable doctrine and strategies to conduct low-intensity conflict.

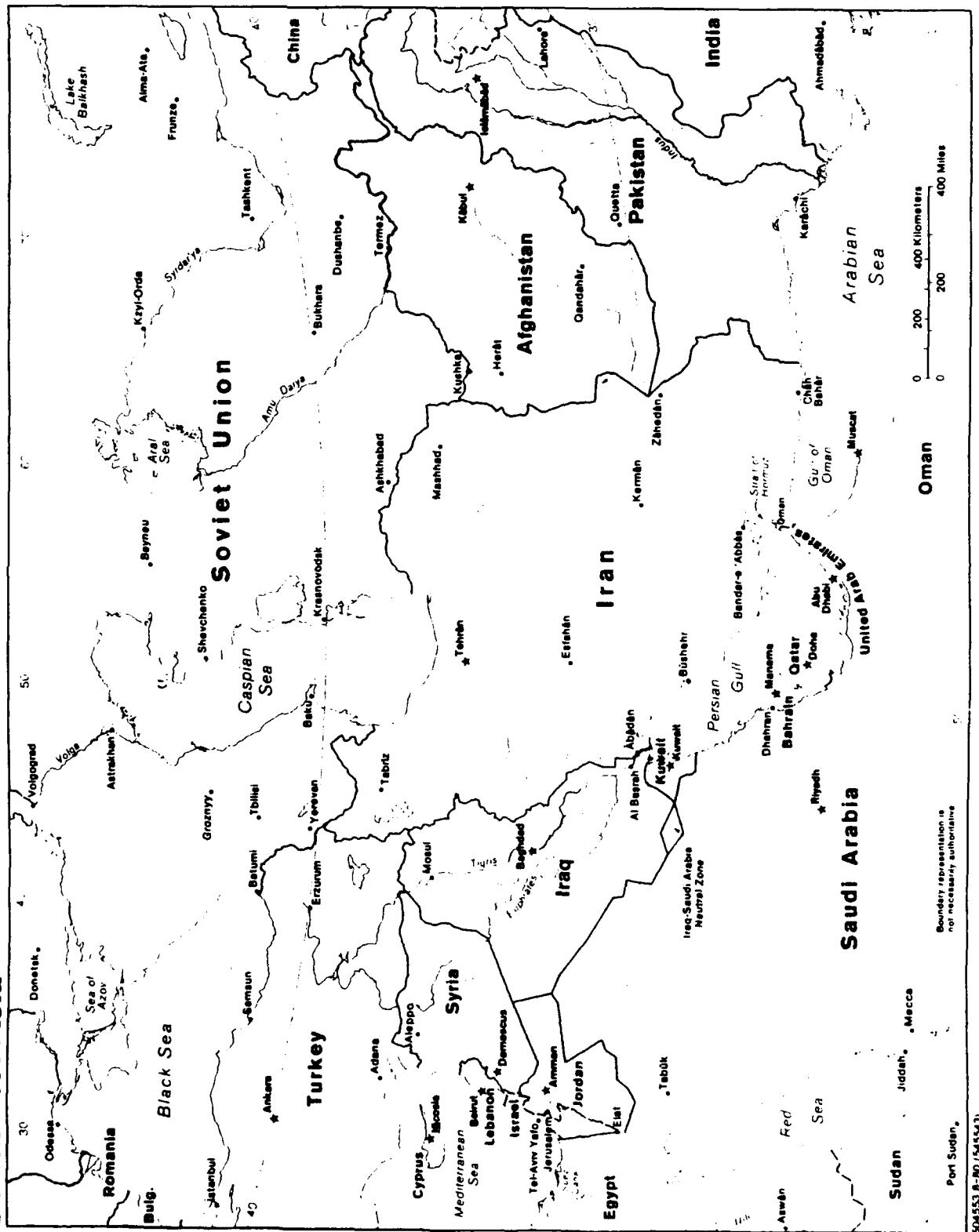
## EPILOGUE

The U.S.-Soviet agreement to cut weapons shipments to their warring clients in Afghanistan gave both Washington and Moscow a face-saving exit from the costliest and bloodiest conflict of the 1980's.<sup>93</sup> The superpowers may have left the fighting, but the economic and social decay from this twelve-year "war by proxy" won't end anytime soon.<sup>94</sup> One statistic created by the war in Afghanistan demonstrates the damage which the Soviets have done: of the twelve million refugees in the entire world, almost half are Afghan! Hopefully the internal fighting will stop and the Afghan nation can start rebuilding. However, a regional proxy war may be waged amongst Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran, all of which have been supporting smaller Shiite parties. These parties are demanding an ever-increasing share of power; if war erupts, the battleground may again be Afghanistan.

Southwest Asia

31

## FIGURE 1



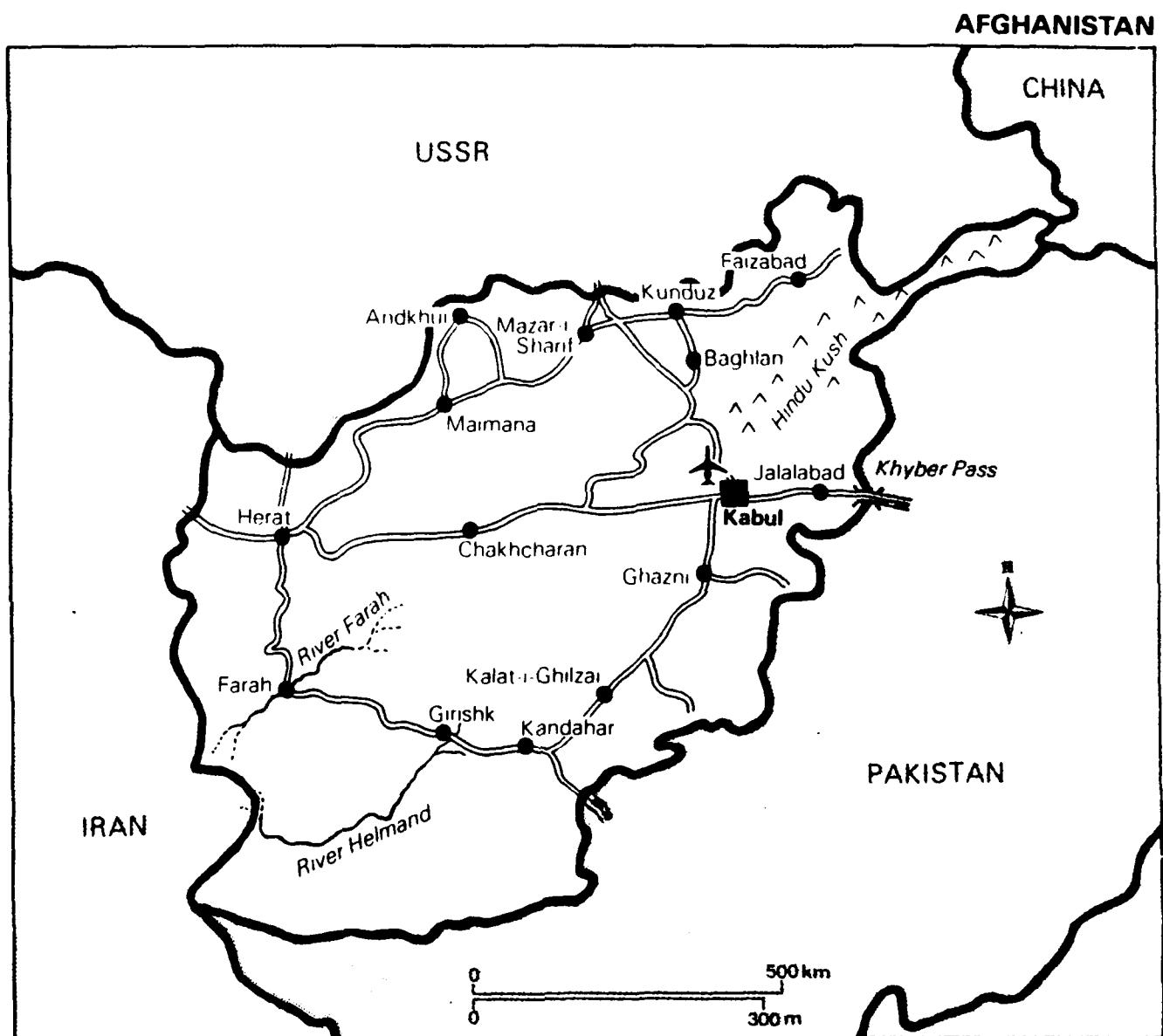


FIGURE 2



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